DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 281 404 HE 020 045

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TITLE A Message for Governors and State Legislators: "The Minimum Competency Approach Can Be Bad for the Health of Higher Education."
PUB DATE [86]
NOTE 9p.; Paper collected as part of the American Association for Higher Education Assessment Forum.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Standards; College Students; *Educational Assessment; Educational Objectives; Educational Quality; Evaluation Criteria; Government School Relationship; *Higher Education; Institutional Autonomy; *Minimum Competencies; *Outcomes of Education; Skill Development; *Student Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS *AAHE Assessment Forum

ABSTRACT

Aspects of proposed higher education reforms that involve assessment of students learning are clarified by the president of the Educational Testing Service. Governors and state legislators are advised not to adopt state minimum competency standards for higher education. It is claimed that the responsibility for setting instructional standards and academic policy rests with the college and that higher education is concerned with much more than minimum competencies. To be successful any general assessment program would require consensus on the essentials of a higher education, and this task is complex because of the diversity of academic, professional, and career programs. In addition, tests alone cannot evaluate institutions. Elements of an assessment approach that may be workable include: (1) focusing on mastery of knowledge and skills in a field; (2) recognizing that specific knowledge and skills required of students will differ by college; (3) applying assessment results to improve students and instruction; and (4) using a wide range of data and measures for the assessment. Differences between educational goals of higher education and elementary/secondary education that affect assessment are noted. (SW)

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A MESSAGE FOR GOVERNORS AND STATE LEGISLATORS: "THE MINIMUM COMPETENCY APPROACH CAN BE BAD FOR THE HEALTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION"

Gregory R. Anrig
President
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A MESSAGE FOR GOVERNORS AND STATE LEGISLATORS: "THE MINIMUM COMPETENCY APPROACH CAN BE BAD FOR THE HEALTH OF HIGHER EDUCATION"

Gregory R. Anrig
President
Educational Testing Service

No one intends to standardize higher education. Everyone wants to strengthen student and institutional performance. If we settle for shortcuts and expediency, however, we will get little improvement and a lot of standardization in higher education.

Based on inquiries ETS has received from elected officials, this can happen if we are not careful. Elected state leaders have been in the forefront of school reform in the 1980s. Much to their credit, educational standards for schools and teachers have been raised and student performance is improving at the elementary and secondary levels of education.

Elected state leaders are now focusing their attention on higher education. It is important for them to recognize how constructive change for higher education must differ from that initiated for the schools. Many state leaders already are sensitive to this, but it might be helpful to elected officials if the nation's largest measurement organization expressed its views on those aspects of proposed higher education reforms that involve assessment of what students learn.

It would be a mistake to say "Now that we have established state minimum competency standards for the schools, let's do the same for higher education." There are four reasons why this externally imposed approach would be a mistake.

- The responsibility for setting instructional standards and academic policy in public as well as private higher education historically has rested with the institutions and, within the institutions, with the faculty. If efforts to improve student performance are to work, the institutions must be stimulated to act. Government cannot do it for them.

- Higher education is concerned with much more than minimum competencies. To equate higher education with such minimums is to contradict and undermine its very purpose.

- Gaining consensus on the "essentials" of a higher education is more complex than in the schools because of the diversity of academic, professional, and career programs that students select. Such agreement is essential for any general assessment program to be successful within or across institutions in a state. The diversity of institutions -- community colleges, state colleges, and major research universities -- adds to this complexity. State boards of higher education in a few states such as Maryland and New Jersey are attempting to develop this consensus. Their experience can provide useful guidance, but each state must go through its own process of involvement if a workable consensus is to be achieved.

- Tests alone cannot evaluate institutions. Just as no test or combination of tests can capture the quality of a state legislature, or a church, or a museum, or a hospital, so too with a college or university. Informed human judgment, based on many sources of information, is essential.

I recognize the pressures on elected officials to promote accountability for educational standards in a period of fiscal constraint and economic competition. (Before coming to ETS, I was commissioner of education under three Massachusetts governors.) I believe, however, that the pressures are different for higher education than they have been for schools. There is no public outcry for change comparable in intensity to that experienced by the schools through the 1970s -- largely fired by a long-term decline in student test scores. Unlike students in elementary and secondary schools, students who attend a college or university do so voluntarily rather than under a compulsory attendance law. They have some choice in the kind of institution they attend. If dissatisfied, they can (and do) transfer to another public or private institution. Because of these differences, the primary focus of higher education reform can be on what is the most effective way to strengthen standards, rather than on what is the quickest way to respond to very restive voters. There is enough time to do it right.

The bottom-line reason not to adapt to higher education the minimum competency approach states have legislated for schools is that it won't work. The state interest is not in documenting performance but in improving it. What are the characteristics of

an assessment approach for higher education that is more likely to work and improve? Here are some suggestions:

- It will focus not on minimums but on higher levels of mastery -- mastery of the knowledge and skills associated with success in the chosen field of study and in adult life.

- The specific knowledge and skills will be institutionally determined by faculty responsible for developing these learning outcomes. These can and will differ among institutions.

- The process employed for developing the approach and the use to which the results are applied will be aimed at instructional and individual improvement. Assessment will be an integral part of instructional improvement rather than a separate function with its own purpose.

- Faculty and students will feel that the approach and its results are useful to them and help them improve performance.

- Assessment will not be synonymous with testing. While test results may be part of the information assessed, an assessment should not be limited to them. A wide range of data -- commonly available at most institutions -- will be analyzed as part of an overall assessment (e.g., retention rates, grades earned, graduation rates, student and alumni surveys, post-graduation placement

data, existing data on undergraduate and graduate admission tests, library usage, performance within majors, significant student accomplishments, writing samples, work portfolios, etc.). To minimize intrusion on instructional time, existing data and sampling techniques will be primary sources of information.

Elementary and secondary schools are organized around a set of common purposes. Foremost among them is to help all students develop a core of basic academic skills, whether or not they plan to go on to college. Undue emphasis in higher education on standardized tests of elementary skills may detract from the institutions' central priority to develop higher academic knowledge and advanced skills. Relevant test results can be used as part of a broad institutional assessment program, but that program should include other information pertinent to judging learning outcomes in order to improve curriculum, instruction, placement, and advising.

Within this context, what then can be recommended for state action to strengthen academic standards in higher education? First, consider using the "bully pulpit" of your office to highlight the need for action at the institutional level. Governors and legislative leaders already are in the forefront of such campaigns in several states. Second, state incentive grants for institutions of higher education can stimulate the institutions to initiate their own efforts to strengthen educational standards. In ETS's home state, New Jersey Governor Thomas Kean has initiated such a challenge grant program and some recent awards have been to develop campus-based assessment programs and follow-up help to students. Third, consider joining with your state's higher education governing boards and regional accreditation association in collaboratively sponsoring conferences and workshops for faculty and administrators to learn more about traditional and innovative

efforts to bolster standards in your state and elsewhere. Such joint efforts also can help develop the consensus necessary for an effective assessment program. Fourth, provide recognition for the positive initiatives of institutions within your state that are leading the way.

I recognize the reality of political timetables versus those for change in higher education institutions. The chair of one higher education committee in the legislature of a major state recently remarked that the mood among her colleagues was "If we don't test, we won't tax." This pressure, though real, must be resisted if the goal is effective improvement of standards. If expediency prevails, the result can severely damage the educational resource that higher education represents to your state economically and socially. Shortcuts to stronger standards in colleges and universities can reduce diversity and promote conformity in higher education. No governor or legislator in the country wants that to happen.

The next few years may prove to be one of the most exciting periods in the recent history of higher education. This will require strong and sensitive leadership, the kind of leadership so evident in many of the state efforts for educational reform during the first half of the 1980s. The challenge will be for that leadership to find new and unique ways that will work for higher education. These can and should differ from those that have been used for the schools.